FLYING SOLO
A STAR WARS ZINE

FOREWORD

How many Star Wars writers start any piece with how important the movies have been during their life? All of us? You're probably tired of hearing it. But let's just say I was born in the 1970s, when the music was terrible but the movies were starting to show us what a blockbuster was. Which gave way to the 80s, and subsequent action figures, and sequels upon sequels.

Getting asked to write the *Solo* novelization was a delightful shock, but somewhat unexpected. I'll be honest, I was always a Luke fan over a Han fan. Pure, wide-eyed, farmboy idealism wormed its way through my black sarcastic heart every time. That's probably why I grew up sarcastic myself. I didn't want to *love* the cynical charmer, I wanted to *be* the cynical charmer! But this book made me look at Han and his motivations a little more closely, which helped me look at both Han as a character and Star Wars as a series in different ways.

Han lives by his wits and doesn't think things through. When he wants something to happen, he acts like it is already happening and uses it to guide his actions, even if it's impossible. You've heard the phrase, "dress for the job you want, not the job you have"? That is Han's inner monologue, if less specifically about clothing and more about acting like he is where he should be (and wants to be) all the time. Flying casual, yanno?

Han's bravado is his shield, since he's been burned enough to want to be a lone wolf. If he doesn't allow himself to love, he doesn't allow himself to get hurt. But he's a good guy at heart, and when he cares about someone, he will do anything for them, complaining all the way about what an imposition it is.

Solo is an interesting story because a lot of what happens isn't black and white, good guy and bad guy. Han, being a smuggler, already lives in a gray part of the ethical universe, but the questionable actions of the movie go beyond Han. I've heard debates regarding Qi'ra: was she cruel to Han? * Was she betraying him or shielding him by joining with Darth Maul at the end? **

> * No, you have to promise something to betray. She never told him they could be together, he just assumed that since he found her again, everything would be how he wanted it to be without considering what she had gone through over the years, or what/who might stand in their way. See the "Han dressed for the job he wanted" comment above, and here he dressed to be Qi'ra's romantic partner and thought they'd be together forever, without ever actually discussing this with her. (Pro tip- talk to your romantic interest. When you assume, you end up losing your intended to crime syndicates).

And then of course there's the problem with L3-37.

We finally had a *female* droid. We had a *kick ass freedom fighter* female droid. The little girl inside me who had ONE character to play when she was pretending at Star Wars with Kevin and Eric (yes, I still remember my Star Wars obsessed friends from first grade) on the elementary school playground finally had a choice of characters to pretend to be! I was so excited...

And then L3's dedication to her cause and staunch demands for free will and agency were played for laughs, and then she was sacrificed to do exactly *what she fought against*; to be an obedient droid with no free will.

But here is where I loved having the role of writing the novel. I had *power*. One of the perks of writing a novelization is adding inner monologues and making motivations clearer than they might be on screen.

Fun fact: novelizations are not meant to be straight regurgitations of the script in prose form. Editors require writers to flesh out some existing scenes, include some deleted scenes, and invent some entirely new scenes. And I was surprised and delighted by the amount of room they gave us to play. Movies are limited by time and budget, but you can do anything in a book. You can also go inside someone's head the way you can't in a movie.

So I decided to give L3 a story that she was in charge of. Shot to pieces, yes. Uploaded to the Falcon without consent, yes. But what was going on inside her (poor, mangled) head?

As I dipped in Star Wars lore, I found that The Millennium Falcon has three AIs. Two droids who were there before Lando got her, and the third is L3. While L3 did like Lando as a partner, she was with him of her own free will and would never have sacrificed herself for a non-droid. Not even him. So when it came time for Lando to upload her to the Falcon, I decided to give her a choice. She could have said no and refused to join with the other AIs, letting our heroes perish in space. But there are more lives at stake than the characters aboard the Falcon: the AIs making up the Falcon itself. *She merges with the Falcon for the ship's sake*. And that gives her agency and a heroic end instead of being reduced to the equivalent of a USB drive you use to plug a snarky personality into your GPS.

Fun facts about writing a Star Wars novelization, *Solo* specifically:

As I said above, we write several of our own scenes, we don't just take the script and put a little bit of action out of already written dialogue. I did include one deleted scene: the one where Han and Qi'ra end up in a tank of eels together. But what was more fun was adding my own scenes: the prologue, the epilogue, the scene with Lando and Chewie and the hair products, the aforementioned L3 upload scene, and the expanded scene where Qi'ra and L3 continue their conversation about their histories, moving beyond talking about the men. I also gave Val a flashback of her life with Beckett before she dies.

Lucasfilm refused only one of my added scenes, and that was a flashback of Enfys Nest training as a girl. And it wasn't that they didn't like it; they didn't want to expand the character's backstory at that time.

Another fun fact: it's hard to retell a story and make it fresh. I hit a wall at the space yacht party where I had my script notes, the YA novelization that was already complete, and I couldn't figure out how to tell a scene in a third way that didn't feel like I was regurgitating the scene the way the other two had. That's when I realized the power of point of view. A movie fan will see what the director wants them to see. Han makes trouble for himself and runs away, you have to figure out what his emotions and motivations are. But the novel can show Han getting into a mess from his own POV, probably showing him as a well-meaning guy making things hard for someone who clearly deserves it (or himself), or just trying to get by. I also could include Qi'ra's point of view, watching Han show up and try to fit in at a fancy party. The movie fan saw Han and Qi'ra try to make it through customs and fail as they're caught by a customs agent, but the reader saw it from the overworked agent's angle, dealing with two more punks ruining her orderly day.

The last fun fact: the scene with Darth Maul at the end was kept secret from nearly *everyone*. Literally everyone, including people working on the movie. The script I was given said it was too secret and they didn't want to name the character; they just gave the dialogue for the scene. I didn't get his name until the last part of the writing process, which was good, because I was able to describe him for the reader. Nowhere could I say that it was Maul since it was Qi'ra's point of view! I realized everyone in the audience would be freaking out when they saw him, but Qi'ra wouldn't know who he was. It's a big galaxy, and tiny street urchins don't

** This one is more debatable. Sure, she could have been choosing Maul over Han, but I think she was shielding him from Maul's attention. Also, she couldn't get away from her association with Crimson Dawn, something she *did* explain to Han. (To my memory, his response was "whatever lol") I saw Qi'ra as a good character in a bad situation, a Tyrion Lannister character, if you will. There's not much she can do to get out of her ties with Maul, so she does what good she can within its limitations. She is a survivor above all else, not an opportunist.

usually keep up with the power plays of the Jedi and Sith. To her, he was a pretty frightening guy who ran Crimson Dawn and... was that the *Force* he was using at the end? And he had a light saber? Uh oh...

Writing this book was a fabulous experience and I was so honored Lucasfilm trusted me with these characters. I can't believe it's been 5 years, but heck, the pandemic squashed all sense of time for me. So thanks to Flying Solo for letting me drop in and reminisce a little bit!

Never tell me the odds,

Mur Lafferty

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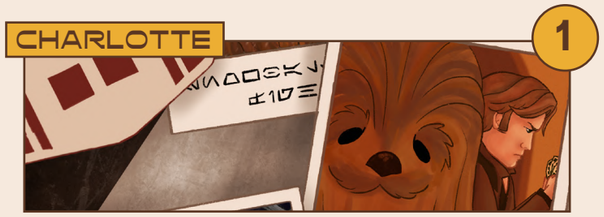

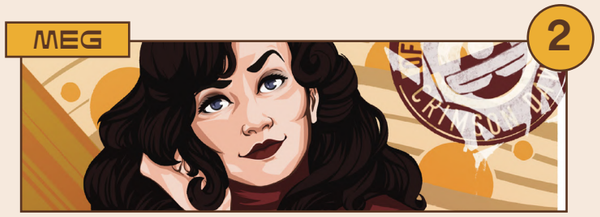

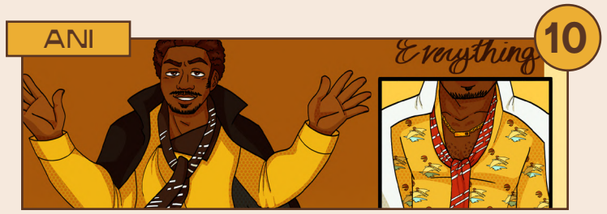

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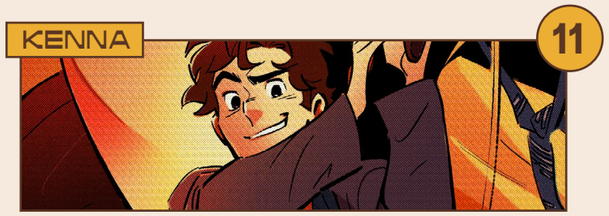

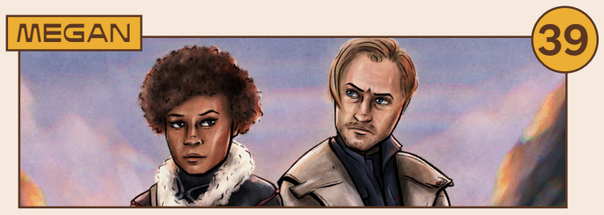

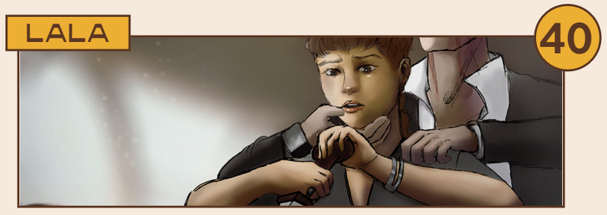

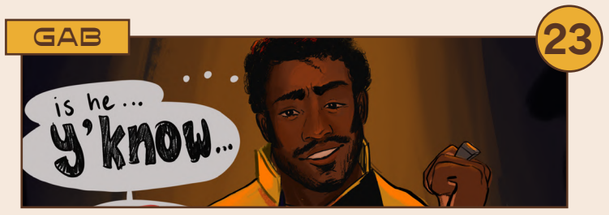

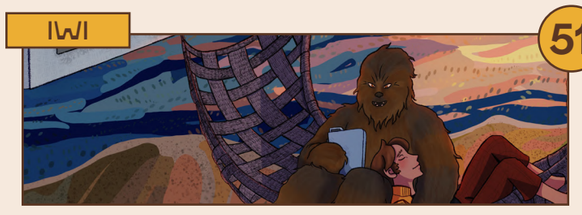

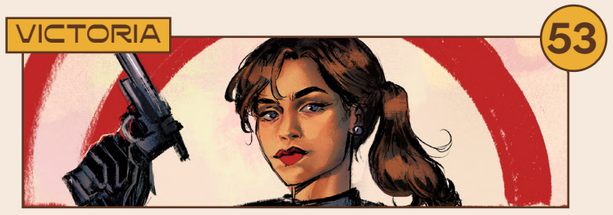

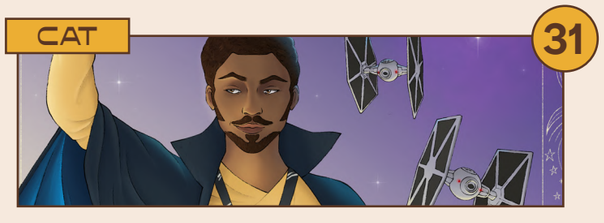

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"Just Be Charming"

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The Truth About Capes

By Jeff

Lando Calrissian wasn't a man of many friends or casual relationships—they ended up always coming back for him or despising him. This was seen as true when he met Qi'ra, expecting to repay her for her more than terrifying boss, Dryden Vos.

He knew when to play his cards right, especially when owing people like Dryden. Charming his way in a fashion that Qi'ra sure was used to. Compliments and kisses on the back of hands were what he frequently goes for when charming people.

This was something that L3 made fun of him for doing. She always muttered something that had him rolling his eyes in a fond but annoyed manner. L3 liked making fun of him for the way he acted around other people, most notably when it came down to attractive people who threaten him such as Qi'ra.

It was as if his relationships with women threatening him for one thing or another always made L3 laugh about his misfortune more than the ones involving men or others.

His relationship with L3 was more than a companion or crew mate of the Millennium Falcon—she was a sort of sister to him. Someone that understood him when he had his charming façade and pretended to be some other guy. She got what he was trying to be, as she was also building herself to be *her*.

The capes, the kisses on the back of hands, the constant flirting with terminology of ships, and cheating on Sabacc games or, as Lando liked to call it, winning with wits, were all another part of Lando that was him but not *him*. Bits or pieces of things that he took from passing people in his

life. The way dressing up in the charming capes he loved to get customized in different parts of the galaxy made him feel like another man. A mask that was easily put on and taken off like his cape in a stranger's room or after another successful run in his beautiful ship. A costume of sorts that comforted him in the darkest of times.

Which was how he ended up losing the Millennium Falcon—trying to be a good guy helping Kristiss in her small liberation of her people. Which ended in L3 doing the same with the droids there.

But being a leader of people was something that scared Lando—the responsibility of taking care of people, and helping make things better. It was not something that he grew up with, so L3 and him ending on Vandor playing Sabacc to get the Millenium Falcon back for his little *rebellion* act had a higher cost on his pride that he originally bargained for. When he saw this scrawny looking guy pull up to his table gambling on greatness.

Lando was glad L3 was off some other place while he flirted with this new guy. He hadn't minded him as much at first, thinking it was some other kid over his head with ambitions. Until he started to lose a couple of games against him.

Lando knew something was up with him, but tried to ignore his constant distrust of people. Then Han, or *Haan* as he liked to tease him, raised his bet of two thousand with all he had. With a little bit of dramatics here and there and Lando had won the game by cheati– More like thinking outside the box and taking it all home, VCX-100 included.

He knew trouble was near when he saw Qi'ra once again, near *Haan*. That kid was more trouble than he hoped for. It was all piling up into a dreary situation which involved Qi'ra, and apparently, Tobias Beckett. They had offered, or in other words *forced*, Lando to sign up his beloved ship into running a treacherous mission to the spice mines of Kessel. His precious, and still impounded, ship, but neither of them needed to know that at that instant.

One thing led to another, with more of what L3 called "theatrics" to get out of a further awful situation. It all was going up with his persona, the one he had to build over the years to simply survive, until Han decided to mention his ship.

Corellian YT-1300, Han had said to him in sort of awe. Lando's flirty side came out with that, side-eyeing Han. When Han mentioned he had been on one with his dad, that had taken Lando out of his mood a bit. Realization had dawned on Lando at some point, making him want to be honest about himself for once. A weird occurrence that only happened with L3 or when he was drunk on some else's bed. Lando went ahead and told Han about his family, a thing he didn't even bring up with L3. The rawness of Han's awe at just being in the cockpit of his ship made him want to duel in the past for a bit.

He remembered being annoyed at L3 for interrupting Han and him having a moment, which he covered up to her with more flirting, which he wasn't opposed to.

Lando, feeling more cocky and flirty than he wanted to with Han, started to explain the complexities of how his ship worked. How to calculate what the kid called a "simple" jump to hyperspace to get to the mines. Lando had to explain this to the charming scruffy looking kid, as Han didn't have in consideration that they could not make a direct course to Kessel, but having to thread to the Si'Klaata cluster to just pass through the Maelstrom.

L3 took the chance, once he was finished explaining to Han, what Lando's true intentions were with the kid: flirting. This, of course, Lando did not deny, just ignored it as another silly thing that his companion said. And just followed up with that, saying a straightforward endearment to the kid.

Making a show out of taking his ship out of hyperspace to gain more control over this state of affairs he had ended up in. Showing off the one thing he cared the most in the vastness of this galaxy.

Lando had to get away from that small moment that had affected him in some way he was not used to by telling L3 he was checking on the dampers.

Maybe it was his luck, or gut feeling, telling him that something was wrong when he started the Kessel run. As when he saw the mining colony closing by on the pilot seat. Lando tried to ease with filming another chapter of what he called the Lando Chronicles.

After that, it was a blur. Running to help them, blazing blasters here and there. Waiting to see L3 and get out of this forsaken mining colony. When he saw her go down in the middle of the chaos. He hadn't remembered himself being this impulsive, running through blaster burns and smoke just to get to her. Finding her failing to understand what was happening to her.

Lando, in that instant, did not care for anything else except his sister. He took a blaster burn to his arm, stopping him from getting her to safety. Maybe some of

that same feeling Han had rubbed off on Lando on the Millennium Falcon's cockpit had suddenly affected Han again. A feeling of doing the right thing for the right people, of hope for better things in this lonely galaxy. Han took off running to Lando's side to pick him up with one arm injured, he had felt a sense of fondness and panic as Chewie picked him up, with L3 slowly fading away in his arms.

He knew his façade was completely gone the moment L3 muttered her last words to him. Lando could only apologize to her, he wasn't exactly sure of what, while resting in a silence that was unusual of him. A grief that he had rarely felt, a sense of loneliness he hadn't experienced since he had met her, had suddenly hit Lando. From the moment she had started annoying him in a fashion which he was unused to, to all the times he had wished back in Socorro for someone to make surviving in the streets of his home world easier.

Lando was annoyed with meeting every single one of the people he had taken on this job with, as he thought it would have been an easy go to get his ship back and get rich at the same time. That had ended up costing him something that he knew he wouldn't get back. Lando was so angry over it all, he didn't care at that point if Han was the one piloting his ship out of the mines.

Royally pissed off and exasperated at this whole stupid situation, Lando didn't even acknowledge his own injury or Han's small condolences. Which was the only one he got out of the whole crew.

Getting out of the Maelstrom had been another thing, having to fight just to keep the remainder of the Millennium Falcon intact. Shouting at all of them for ruining the few things that were keeping him sane, his custom capes, L3, and his beautiful ship. Letting his dislike for letting Han fly his ship vocally known.

Lando had known that they would need L3 to get out of here, but he could not face the brutality on which Qi'ra had taken her internal processor out at his request. The apology had not made it any better.

Getting L3's navigational system to interface with the Millennium Falcon was something odd to him. Seeing the last thing L3 had of herself becoming part of something bigger. *She's part of the ship now*, Lando had said, hopefully. Lando felt hope, a thing he didn't allow himself to feel, as it had taken him years to understand hope had nothing to do with his luck.

Finding the best path through the Maw with L3, as she had made it clear now. That nothing would happen to his ship on his watch.

Arriving at Savareen was just another blur of emotions that were filled by annoyance and somewhat hatred for that handsome kid. Not caring about taking half of his cut anymore, he left them all stranded while he took the Millennium Falcon out of the planet. Taking the remaining piece that made his selfish heart kind, L3's final fragment.

It wasn't as if he didn't think about Han as he left. The kid, much like Lando himself, also pretended to be someone he was not. An outlaw that was just a good guy with some big heart. Han was not just another charming guy with fancy capes and a lovely ship.

And L3 had known how much Lando had loved his ship, but she knew deep down the appreciation Lando had for her in those arguments they shared. It was something far deeper for either of them to comprehend. Something special. A bond that could be seen by anyone who saw them bickering together and insulting each other in the fondest of ways. Lando didn't like voicing his care for anyone in case they took their leave as soon as he mentioned it, so he never told L3. But he knew that she had known all the words that he couldn't dare to say.

Lando kept looking at his copilot's seat, wishing, *hoping* for her to appear complaining about anything. He just rubbed at his face, trying to remember a bar he hadn't been thrown out of to go get drunk out of his mind. That was when he saw his name light up in the console of the ship.

LANDO, it said in bold letters, and he just knew it was L3. He missed her voice, knowing if she was being sarcastic about the things she would last say to Lando. About getting out of Savareen in one piece, taking her with him to wherever he was next. The mere thought of someone else driving his ship made him nauseous.

A survivor was the word he had called him. The full integration of L3 was coming to a close, they both knew it. L3 knew Lando was trying to comfort her when she shared her concerns about her free will. *We're still together*, Lando told her. *My best friend, the best copilot ever, is still with me.*

WAS FUN… YOU, L3 told Lando for the last time. It would be a new reality. But it would still be him, L3, and the Falcon against the galaxy. As it always had been.

Meeting Han, once again, was just Lando's bad luck of attracting people he didn't want to see the most. Someone who had come in his life to shake it all up. Especially when he just came in to steal the only thing that had left of who he was before.

It was pure anger, at his misstep and at losing *his* ship. All Lando asked of Han was to take good care of her, briefly touching the navicomputer as he said so. Leaving the life he had made there behind with a reckless kid that he knew at some point would see again.

Those experiences had shaped Lando to finally grow out of a few old tricks and learn new ones. Leaving Lando alone to deal with his own emotions and insecurities that he feared to face for so long, all thanks to some scrawny kid he met at a Sabacc table.

MANOFBESKAR

The Whittling of a Nonbeliever

By Dani

“Not today, kiddo.”

Generally speaking, Han was no stranger to the dull comforts of shady cantinas. There was familiarity in the consistency of squeaky booths and sticky tables, a film of smoke screening the air as a Trandoshan or a Weequay or a Tognath, or maybe some combination of the three, tended a bar that had probably seen better days. Often it was easy to gauge the gang activity on a planet just by stepping into the local pub and counting the scorch marks on various surfaces.

Today was not any different. Han and Chewie — well, admittedly, just Han — had bungled a job that would have paid off a sizeable collection of debt, and now it was only natural that they’d found the nearest backwater planet to go and sulk. What wasn’t natural was that he was being haunted by a very persistent and very persuasive teenage girl.

At first, Enfys never came to him herself. He’d be minding his own business and suddenly find himself being dragged into an alley at gunpoint by Benthic or losing both his blaster and the entire contents of his pockets in a crowd, only to see Weazel perched upon a stack of crates, smugly twirling Han’s gun and refusing to give him back anything until he heard Enfys’s terms. This strategy had been maddening, and Chewie admitted to him later that it had probably been purposeful on the girl’s part because once she started approaching him herself, he was so grateful for a bit of sanity that he did not care that she was talking crazy in his ear. It was better than threats and thieves.

“Should I come back tomorrow?” Enfys asked, and as usual she spoke to him with an edge to her voice as though she thought her words were enough to not only cut him but gut him too. “Would that be more convenient? Your schedule is so busy, what with the Taris job being such a rousing success.”

“Don’t you have something better to do than follow me?” Han snapped at the girl. She was older now than when he’d first met her, and some of the lingering childish roundness of her cheeks had hollowed out, leaving her to look even harder and sadder than before. He did not like it, really, because no matter how old she got, she still looked unbearably young to him, and he couldn’t help but empathize with her because of that.

Chewie always said that she took advantage of that fact. Han dismissed it because he didn’t want to admit the weakness he had for children.

Besides, he’d argue with Chewie, Enfys isn’t a child! She was only a couple years younger than Han.

And yet, she’d always appear, without fail, because he’d made the mistake of feeling sorry for her once and giving her his personal comm.

“Just,” he’d said on that beach, slinging his thumbs into his belt loops and ignoring the intensity of her stare, “in case, you know, you get into a bind. I’m pretty damn good in a bind, if you haven’t noticed.”

Han hadn’t expected her to take advantage of that offer and decide that “a bind” meant calling on him every couple months to help with some odd job or another. And he *tried* to say no! But Enfys Nest, he found out, was stupid persuasive, and even more stubborn than him.

“Don’t you have something better to do than get yourself so deeply buried in Jabba the Hutt’s stomach folds that you might as well be one of his bed sores?” Enfys retorted without a single ounce of passion in her low, measured voice, and that was always what did Han in. The way her insults were always so casual and vicious, without betraying the depths of her rage. It got beneath his skin.

“Don’t laugh,” Han hissed at Chewie, who had handed Enfys a drink behind Han’s head, and was quite pleased to see her. *He*, apparently, didn’t *need* manipulation to help Enfys out. According to Chewie, he liked her enough as a person, and Han thought he probably said these things to get Han riled up for entertainment purposes. “She’s making fun of you too!”

“No,” Enfys said, taking a sip of the ale that Chewie had offered her, “I’m really not.”

“Great,” Han muttered into his own cup. “Why don’t you two just run off together, then? No reason to tag-team making me miserable.”

“I don’t believe you need either of us to do that for you. You get on fine on your own, don’t you?”

Han’s eyes rolled up toward the smoky ceiling, the sound of a grating local band’s rhythmic music pulsating in his ears and driving his headache out of his skull and into the tips of his fingers. When he looked down at her, he noted that she’d changed her hair a bit since he’d last seen her. Her red curls were cropped about her ears, sticking out beneath the floppy cap she wore. At first he’d been concerned about her walking around unmasked, but she seemed to have mastered the art of being as nondescript as humanly possible, dressing in drab, neutral colors, always looking a bit homeless and aimless and harmless.

“I’m really not in the mood for charity today,” Han told her with a scoff. “Go on. Shoo.”

“Charity?” Enfys arched a brow. “I always pay you.”

“You guilt me into taking less,” he hissed, jerking a finger in her face. She did not so much as blink at him. “How am I supposed to take a real, proper cut when it’s all about starving communities on Ryloth or Wobani! You make me feel like a monster for doing my job.”

“Don’t blame me for the breadth of your own conscience,” Enfys said curtly. “If you feel so bad about it, you could join up with us in earnest. We’ve grown a lot since that coaxium business, and—”

“Nope,” Han cut in. “Not happening.”

“Then don’t blame me for your own abysmal life trajectory,” Enfys replied, the whites of her eyes shining like a beacon as she glared up at him through her brow. “You have debts to pay, don’t you? Well, I have a job for you.”

“I really can’t afford your jobs,” Han sighed. “Sorry, kid. Go find some real bleeding heart because I can’t really do the whole ‘piracy for the cause’ thing.”

“But you’ve done it how many times before?” Enfys demanded. “Certainly after five or six run-abouts with us you’ve realized that you actually *can* do this, and you’re just wasting time and money and energy on being a Hutt drug mule.”

“I prefer the term drug *associate*. Thank you. And!” Han shook his head fiercely as he sat between Chewie’s pitying stare and Enfys’s unfaltering glower. “And it’s way less stupid to be a pirate for yourself! I like living, y’know, it’s nice to breathe. Can’t do that with the Imps getting all up in your business.”

“A criminal is a criminal,” Enfys said, “and a pirate is a pirate. The Empire does not care if your infraction has a cause. You and I would be delivered the same sentence for the same crime, regardless of if you come with me today or not.”

“That’s so not true,” Han argued, albeit weakly, because he did not want to think too hard about it. “You know the horror stories about the crackdown on, y’know — what’s it called, Chewie?”

Chewie stared at him blankly and gave a snippy response.

“Hey, no need to use that tone!” Han frowned. “It was an honest question, sheesh! Anyway, the crackdown on *rebel activity* has been way harsher than other shit, so excuse me for not being enthusiastic about your offer.”

“Obviously I’m not going to convince you to become a card-carrying member,” Enfys said dryly, “so can we cut to the part where you agree to doing this job? I’m on a bit of a time constraint today.”

“I already said no!”

“Did you?” Enfys shrugged. “I thought you needed the money. Or did you *not* just lose an unseemly amount of credits that you need to pay your Hutt benefactor back?”

“You—!” Han’s fingers flexed at her face, and he felt cornered and foolish in that moment. This was why talking to her was so hard because she made it impossible to deny her.

“It’s just a smuggling job,” Enfys sighed. “I’d think you’d be happy to take it, as it’s one thing you’re actually good at.”

“Hey!” Han scowled at her, elbowing Chewie for laughing. “You could try to be a

little more pleasant to the guy you're begging for help, huh? Maybe if you asked more nice-like, added a little *please* on top, I might actually consider your crazy scheme!"

Enfys sucked her teeth disparagingly, her tired eyes flitting over his face, and she swiveled in her chair to face him fully.

"Would you please do a job for me?" she asked flatly.

"So kind of you to ask!" Han clapped his hands together once and felt instantly guilty when she flinched. "Um… no?"

"Is that a question?" she demanded.

"No," he said defensively.

"I'll pay you upfront," Enfys said, more fiercely than before, and it startled him.

"If it's that important," Han gasped, "why not have someone you actually trust do it, huh?"

"I *do* trust you."

Han sat there, mouth open to retort, only for her words to belatedly whack him in the chest and leave him a bit breathless. It wasn't like he hated the girl. He actually was really very fond of her, and he wished he could convince her to leave her vigilantism and rebel fantasies behind. Maybe take her under his wing, or something. It was silly, but she'd probably live longer if she came aboard the *Falcon* and wasn't running around trying to solve the galaxy's problems all the time. He'd never say it, of course, because he knew he couldn't out-stubborn her.

"Uh…" Han scratched behind his ear, shooting Chewie a frantic glance, a plea for help, but his friend seemed just as stunned as he was. "Well, that's — okay. But, like… *why*?"

"You're not so bad a smuggler." Enfys drained her glass, slipped off her stool, and clapped him on the shoulder. "And, I guess, you've got a good heart, beneath all the play-pretend."

"Huh?" Han reeled back, feeling the sting of her words more acutely than her prior insults. "Now hold on a minute!"

"Thanks for the drink, Han. We're leaving within the hour, so make your decision quickly. We're docked at an industrial port on the west side of the city."

Her fingers drifted from his shoulder, and he twisted to stare at her as she whirled away. There was an urgency that he felt now, the maddening desperation of her cause seeping into him, as if transferred from her fingers through the fibers of his vest and taut skin, muscle, and blood just to sink into his bones.

"Hey," Han called, throwing his legs over his stool and reaching for the girl. "Are you—? Enfys, wait."

But she just kept walking, and Han felt a deepening sense of pity and worry consume him as he stood up, searching the tops of the heads in the crowded cantina for a sign of her red curls. He found none.

Chewie was beside him in an instant, a question poised and ready, and Han shook his head fiercely.

"It's such a bad idea, Chewie," he sighed. "She's always roping me into her bad ideas!"

Chewie nudged him with an insistent yowl, and Han nudged him back.

"I'm *going*," he huffed, tossing some credits onto the bar and pushing through the crowd. "Not because we're joining, okay? I just need to make sure she's alright."

He ignored the way Chewie rolled his eyes.

Outside, the night air was warm and muggy, and it almost immediately had Han wishing he had stayed in the temperature controlled cantina. Instead, miserably, he trekked through the streets with Chewbacca at his back, checking his surroundings to make sure they weren't being followed. In his near paranoia, he was not exactly looking directly in front of him, and he yelped when Chewie hooked an arm around his waist and yanked him aside.

"Watch where you're going, Solo," Weazel laughed. At the sound of his voice, Han immediately went to pat down his holster and his pockets, cursing under his breath.

"You little—!" He reached for the small rebel pirate, and he scrambled back when his blaster was tossed in his face. He caught it with a scowl. "Really? I thought we

were done with this. Give me my money back."

"Always a joy workin' with you, Solo," Weazel said with a grin, slipping beside him and clapping his thigh. "You're so funny."

Sure enough, when Han stuck his hands in his pocket, his things were back where they should have been, and he glared at Weazel as he led them through a dark alley that, if Han had not known the guy for a big softie, probably would have been intimidating. Especially with Two-Tubes looming darkly at the end of said alley.

"Hey." Han nodded to Benthic tiredly. "Where'd your fearless leader go?"

"We're taking you to see her," Weazel said, "obviously."

"Obviously," Han taunted with a sneer, "you guys need to work on your pitch because I am not convinced. Every time you come to me I'm shocked any of you are still kickin'!"

"Me too," Weazel said enthusiastically. "See, Solo, you're practically one of us already. You basically *are* one of us, with all the stuff you've done, really. You ought to just make it official."

"In your dreams, Wheezy."

"You're already in it," Benthic said, the Tognath language almost too fast to fully comprehend. "Take a good look at yourself and see what the rest of us see."

"No philosophizing, please," Han grumbled. "I didn't have a chance to get drunk enough for all that nonsense."

"We'll buy you a drink when this is all done, buddy," Weazel chuckled. As he spoke they came upon the docking bay in question, with a teetering, rickety ship that was unfamiliar to Han. It looked like it was about to fall apart, to be honest, and Han realized that was the problem.

"No way you guys are planning to fly out in that!" he gasped, feeling mildly crazed as he imagined the rusted freighter attempting to make atmosphere. It'd fall apart, if not in its ascent, then on the reentry, at whatever planet they stumbled upon next.

"Coming from you," Enfys said, startling him from her place beside him, "that does

spark concern."

"Can you all stop popping up like that?" Han snapped. Enfys merely gazed up at him dully. "Anyway, I get it, alright, you need a new ship. That's apparent now. Does it really have to be *my* ship?"

"We don't have many options," Enfys admitted. She looked, for the first time, a bit nervous, which worried Han worse than anything else.

"Are you alright, Enfys?" he asked her gently, reaching for her shoulder and frowning when she side-stepped him. "Talk to me. What's really going on?"

Enfys's eyes flashed over his face, and there was something there that he could almost read clearly, but it seemed muddled. A mix of emotions, like grief, and fear, and familiar rage, it all simmered to the surface of her face in a sort of anguish that truly shook him at his core.

"Come with me," Enfys said, turning sharply away toward the ship. He followed hesitantly, shooting a worried glance at Chewie, who answered with his own deeply troubled look. This was unlike Enfys, who was always composed, even at her most furious and righteous. They stepped up onto the creaking gangplank, rusty panels grinding and groaning underfoot, and as they entered the dimly lit ship, Han was hit with the smell first. It was familiar, in a stomach-turning way, unwashed bodies that had been left to linger in their own filth. His first thought was *slaves*. And then he squinted through the dark and really looked.

"What the hell?" Han gasped, grabbing Enfys's arm and swinging her around. "Hey, what *is* all this? I'm not smuggling child slaves!"

"Han." Enfys stared at him intensely, and he managed to calm down enough to think properly.

"Freed slaves," he murmured, nodding. "Duh. Right. But still — you know how messy that could get, Enfys, I work for the *Hutts*—"

"They are not slaves." Enfys pushed him away and whirled him around. "Not in the way you think. Look at them, Han. These are children that the Empire took in an attempt to create— well, we don't know the details. Elite soldiers of some kind. They were tortured, when we found them, in a facility that we'd thought was an experimental weapon manufacturing plant. We got lucky, I think, when we found them there. There was some… *thing* that tried to stop us getting out. Weazel

thinks it was a Jedi."

"That's dumb," Han blurted, feeling dizzy and frightened on their behalf. "That's all *insane*. The Jedi — that's all some real bantha shit, I'll tell you right now."

"It happened," Weazel gasped. "It was a Jedi, I think, but all wrong! And I think these kids, they were trying to do something to them, to make more things like the one that nearly took out our ship."

"Great," Han murmured. "Okay. So you stole kids from the Empire. And you want me to smuggle them."

"That would be ideal," Enfys said quietly, not meeting his eye.

Han took a deep breath. His heart thudded hard behind his eyes, the pressure of a migraine beginning to form there, and he glanced around at the small, gaunt faces before him and felt his resolve crumble entirely into dust.

"Fine," he said, anger rising up in him, not at Enfys, but at the Empire, and for the first time he truly understood it all. "*Fine*. You win. I'm in, Enfys."

"What?" Enfys looked up at him in alarm.

"I'm in!" Han half turned his head, smacking Chewie's chest. "Let's go get the *Falcon*. And maybe run through our more reputable contacts, if we've got any."

Chewie merely laughed.

Language Acquisition

By Chris

"I'm impressed. You speak Shryiiwook quite well for such a handsome young man," Chewbacca said as they soared over the snow capped mountain of Vandor on a stolen AT-hauler.

Or at least, that's what Han heard him say. He'd picked out the words *Shyriiwook* and *not bad* and *little human* from the Wookiee's roars, and his brain had dutifully filled in the rest.

Han had always thought of it – conversing with others in mismatched languages, that was – as something akin to being given an ill-assorted jigsaw puzzle and expected to solve it on the spot. Although he'd never been great at puzzles, this game of projecting the missing pieces with his mind onto the empty gaps came naturally to him now.

And if he sometimes put a bit of a spin on other peoples' dialogue for his own amusement, they'd never know. He thought Chewbacca could lighten up a bit anyway; thanks to Han's quick thinking, neither of them would ever again have to worry about wiping their brows clear of mud everytime they so much as blinked, or else run the risk of losing another sense to the putrid swamp planet besides smell.

Han turned to glance at the Wookiee and found his eyes already on him, head tilted in curiosity. Chewbacca looked as if he was awaiting an answer. Han hadn't realized his previous words had been a question.

"I'm good with languages," he offered as an explanation.

Han had grown up on Corellia after all, a vast shipyard that

called itself a planet. Although it was best known across the galaxy for its mass exportation of ace starships and even finer pilots, its inhabitants knew it as a hub of migration. But as the Clone Wars shook away the last remnants of Corellia's innocent wanderlust, it became clear that this was an economy dependent on its populace of refugees.

Refugees with half-empty stomachs and fume-filled lungs.

Local officials and native elites would continue to cling onto Corellia's status as a shining Core World, conveniently turning a blind eye to the impoverished, overcrowded, and ungoverned state of the planet's ground levels. The situation only continued to worsen; a population of displaced people were once again displaced as the Empire began their planetary takeover, sending a kick to the melting pot in the process, its contents spilling out into the streets and down the slums and sewers.

This was the Corellia Han had grown up in. On the crime and grime ridden streets, huddled together with all the other children who'd been abandoned to rot in the filth left behind by a previous generation. Just as their parents had once sought a haven in the future of this planet when they first settled, Han and his group provided one another with a veil of safety only believable by the naivety of a poor orphan.

As imagined as their sanctuary was, the warmth and companionship they were able to extend to each other was real. Even when dinner looked like a rejected sandwich fished out from the dumpster, an apple reconstructed into a worm's home, and a piece of bread so full of rainwater that it could be mistaken for a sponge, they could mask the hunger by trading ridiculously half-baked tales and full-body laughter that left them gasping for air.

The remnants of Corellia's tipped over melting pot had been scooped up by their tiny palms, and it was in this period of his life that a young doe-eyed Han had come to find his penchant for picking up languages.

Though their small pack of street rats had all been born on Corellia, or migrated young in the cases of a couple of their older peers, many had retained their family's mother tongue.

Han first remembered a time when one Mon Calamari teen was tinkering with a scrapped speeder part until it snapped on one of her webbed fingers. She let out a sharp, distinctly non-Basic phrase, alarming those around her while Han raised

a head in curiosity. When he asked her what it meant, she told him it was merely something her people said when they got upset, though her tone was uneasy under the scrutiny of her Quarren friend, clearly knowing something Han didn't.

When the group's efforts to find dinner later that night came back empty-handed, Han repeated that Mon Calamari phrase loudly for all to hear. It earned him a crowd of wide eyes then raucous laughter. Han's round cheeks warmed in response, but he knew he was small and easy to tease, and rather than be left feeling dejected, his yearning to learn new foreign words only grew.

Han's ears would perk up with fascination every time he heard the Rodian twins communicate in clicking tongues. He watched his Ithorian friend in wonder as his dual mouths moved in sync. He begged for an encore when the other kids told nursery rhymes over bonfires in the dying languages of extinct cultures. He was always eager to learn and his peers became increasingly open to sharing.

It was good practice. After all, Han would need to know how to communicate his way across the galaxy if he was going to become a pilot.

The teasing faded and was replaced with surprise and awe. Han truly did have a good ear for foreign dialects, becoming conversational partners for many of the children. They called him a natural. Most shocking of all was his ability to pick up the guttural growls and whines of Shryiiwook.

Han would never forget that lone Wookiee boy who sat with him on the coldest nights, howling together until their teeth chattered. He would also never forget when the White Worms raided their makeshift camp, scavenging for scavengers under the promise of edible food and lukewarm shelters, then hoisting the little scrumrats over their shoulders even when they screamed *no!*

Han was dragged in one direction and the Wookiee boy in the other. They never saw each other again.

Han could only surmise what had happened to him. For all the blackmarket trading and under the table dealing the children would do for the White Worms, were they themselves not also items, things, to be bargained with?

Then again, there were worse fates on Corellia. The best Han could hope for was that that Wookiee boy was taken to a nicer planet with others of his kind.

Maybe Chewbacca knew what happened to him. Han didn't ask.

“Something **speech** *something something* **need better**,*”* Chewbacca roared. Or: *Your pronunciation could use some work,* Han’s mind supplied.

“Oh yeah? And who’s gonna teach me?” Han asked Chewbacca’s retreating back, raising his voice as the wind picked up.

Chewbacca ducked back inside the ship, but not before he told Han, “**Rest**.”

That, at least, was a phrase Han knew well.

"THEY'LL BE FINE."

CAN'T TRUST ANYONE, HUH CHEWIE?

RUUURR RURRHGGHHH!

RIGHT. EXCEPT YOU.

LET'S GO GET OUR SHIP BACK.

The Last Star

By Remi

Enfys Nest has never, under any circumstances, sacrificed her ideals to spare the feelings of others.

She is unflinching in the face of criticism. She is steadfast and loyal. She is fierce. But Enfys is also human, as flawed as any, and she cannot tolerate callousness nor carelessness in her peers. It is for all these reasons that she is widely respected but rarely liked. She made a right mess of today's war table discussions; where others urged caution, she demanded urgency, and where they begged for restraint, she offered only an iron fist.

It worries her, sometimes, how much she has in common with that fierce old man at the table that nobody else ever seems to agree with. They haven't got their clarity of purpose.

A few men died. Good men who she respected– men who were there when they dealt with Dryden Vos and his cronies. It's shameful to have survived such an ordeal only to die shortly after as a consequence of *irresponsible planning*. She has explaining to do and graves to dig, come sunrise.

Across the dark and cavernous expanse of the current Partisan hide-out they've sought shelter in, Enfys can barely make out the shadow of an older man. He is burly and broad-shouldered, clad in the kind of armor you once only ever saw on Republic war generals, commandos, warlords and men with God complexes. It's held together by scrap and string. In her hands, she turns her helmet over, her thumb stroking the indentation where she had to hyperglue the damaged pieces together. A gold line runs across the brow as evidence of its breaking. It's stronger now than ever.

The soft breaths of sleeping men and the low hum of machines creates a blanket of noise separating them from the quiet rain outside. In the dim light of the archways, a Partisan and a Cloud Rider each stand guard, still and tall as stone statues.

The sound of metal creaking draws her attention again. Enfys is not *technically* supposed to be up and about in this part of the encampment, so she ducks her head as she rounds the corner to peer through the darkness. Enfys is as suspicious of Saw as she is of anyone else in this treacherous world, though he would be the last person she would expect to stab her in the back. So she watches.

A child slips out from behind an unassuming panel in the wall. A dull glow emanates from behind her, as though there's an entire room or perhaps even a tunnel behind her. Enfys shouldn't be surprised; this kind of sanctuary requires many emergency exit routes, especially for a man as paranoid as Saw Gerrera. Enfys squints, her eyes slowly adjusting to the low light.

It's a little girl. Her hair is unkempt and her green jacket hangs crookedly off her arm as she ducks and shuts the panel behind her, approaching Saw.

Has he stooped so low as to employ the use of child fighters? Enfys cannot imagine. She reminds herself only a moment later that she too joined this fight much younger than she should have. She too was once a child, unkempt and weary, creeping through the dark of a rebel encampment.

"Saw," whispers the little girl. She shuffles closer, her hands folded at her waist. "I tried to be quiet."

He reaches out his big hand to rest atop her head, softly brushing her bangs aside. "You did well, my child."

"Who's here now? I heard speeders, I heard shouting." The inquisitive girl looks up at him. Her skin is light, blemished by a fading sunburn, and her unruly hair is dark.

He sighs and hums, continuing to brush her bangs with his thumb and forefinger. "They are our allies, from another system. They are called the Cloud Riders, and they are– they are vengeance from above. They have fashioned speeder bikes into much greater machines."

"Are they *pirates*?" she whispers, stunned.

He takes a moment to consider that. "It depends on who you ask."

"But pirates are bad!"

Saw chuckles. He grabs her earlobe and playfully, lightly, yanks it. "We are no better!"

The girl scrunches her face and pulls away, grinning. "I want to fly one of their bike things, maybe."

"Jyn," says Saw, sucking his teeth. "You know the rules. We cannot allow our allies to see you."

"Can't let the enemy see me neither," says the girl– Jyn– decidedly crestfallen. "Can't let anybody see me."

Enfys turns her helmet in her hands. It is more her face than her own, these days. "It's better that way," he promises. "The world is–"

"Treacherous–"

"–not funny. Danger lurks at–"

Jyn copies his voice, mock deep. "–Every corner!"

Enfys almost laughs, she touches the wall, hand slipping against stone. A pebble falls. "*Shh!*" hisses Saw.

Silence. Enfys flattens her back against the wall, cycling through her excuses and her explanations. She thumbs the switch on her electrostaff. Perhaps this child is a secret kept under threat of death. She waits.

"You mustn't talk so loud," says Saw.

Jyn takes a moment to answer. "What kind of– what kind of alien is the leader? The one with the spikes?"

Saw laughs despite himself. Enfys takes it as a cue to safely peek into the room again, almost laughing herself.

"She is not an alien. It is a helmet she fashioned herself, I imagine. Some choose to

wear their pride on their face. Others wear it on their armor."

"She?" gasps Jyn, eyes wide with delight. She hops up onto the bed beside Saw. "The leader is a girl?"

It is easy to forget the big shadow she casts. It's easy to forget that she can be admired for what she is beneath the helmet.

It is beginning to dawn on Enfys that this is not some stray child but *his* child, the way she sits beside him and he rests his hand upon her shoulder, armored and heavy. Saw nods. "She is not just a girl but a *young* girl. Like I told you. The revolution will be led by the children, and the women, the aliens, the sickly, and all the people the Empire only tolerates timid and forgotten."

He lifts Jyn's chin with his clenched hand, looking into her eyes and smoothing her hair with the other. "My child, the dream is in your hands."

She grasps his wrist with her hand. "I know."

Her mother told her something similar once, a long time ago, back before hope became a dangerous idea. *You'll guide our people to the stars*, she'd said. *Until we can go no higher.*

A moment later, Saw reaches out towards the nearest crate, procuring a brush and hair ties. He pats the spot beside him. "Let's address this nest now, my little one."

Enfys turns her shoulder to the scene. It doesn't belong to her.

Outside, the rain thunders all night.

Enfys awakens to fire.

Everywhere *fire*; ultraviolet blasts of blue-hot flames lick the soggy wooden plans maintaining the structural integrity of their encampment, a sort of cave hollowed out beneath a craggy cliffside. The crates of weapons resupplies are alight, stinking of gas and iron. The electronic wirings have been frayed and spark as she rushes to duck under them. An explosion shakes the earth, this one sooner than the space between the last. Raucous chaos crushes her from all sides. The noise is impenetrable. The air stings to breathe. Her lungs ache. Magenta gas leaks

across the ground, blurring her view of the muddy footprints below. Everyone is screaming, shouting, or cursing. Blasters fire relentlessly, rocketing bursts of blue and red light. They *ping* and ricochet off the metal paneling surrounding them.

Enfys slams her back against the nearest wall, gasping for air as she strikes a stormtrooper with a well-timed swing of her electrostaff.

Someone is screaming like they've been cut to pieces. To her other side, someone *has* been cut to pieces. Enfys squeezes her eyes shut. Her hand slides along the metal panel as she tries to feel out her way to the exit–when she remembers.

Jyn! The passageway!

Outside, Saw is unconscious, being dragged towards cover by another Partisan. A man with a slugthrower is keeping him covered. The scene disappears with another explosion; the ground shakes, dust and stone dislodging from the ceiling above. Everything just moved, like the mountain decided it'd had enough of its stagnant life and wanted to get up and walk away.

The girl.

Enfys pushes through the delirious overstimulation of smoke inhalation and what is most likely a mild concussion. Her helmet guarded her from the worst of it.

She turns the corner sharply, stepping into Saw's private area with her staff drawn and a hand on her holster.

There's not a soul to see it.

She blinks the smoke away, tears brimming in her eyes, and trudges towards the metal panel. The bed has been shoved up against it, dislodged by one of the explosions. Enfys lurches forward to grab it, dragging it away with all the strength still left in her. The adrenaline keeps her alive, heart pounding faster than hyperspeed.

A child falls forwards the moment the bed is moved, as if she'd been pushing on it the entire time, too weak to get any traction. Jyn, her face marked with soot and eyes foggy, coughs violently.

It is only then that Enfys realizes the girl has not made a sound. Quiet, just like she promised. She kneels before her and holds out a hand. "I am Enfys Nest of the

Cloud Riders," she says, her modulated voice sounding quite frightening, distorted by smoke, her heavy fall, and chemicals. "You mustn't be afraid. We have to go."

Jyn recoils at her touch, looking up with eyes like dinner platters. She can't seem to fathom the sight before her, yet neither can she deny her thorough training. She has been raised dubious on instinct– distrustful by default. Enfys is not going to be innocent until she's proven herself not guilty. She reaches out and brusquely picks the girl up beneath the arms, pulling her to her chest and stumbling to her feet. The girl kicks and thrashes. "No! No! Saw!"

Fruitless against Enfys' superior strength and the fierce determination of her adrenaline, Jyn refocuses her efforts on trying to pull Enfys' helmet off her head. She pounds on the side of it with her small hands. "I have to stay with Saw!"

Enfys can remember another life, another world, where a small girl held onto her mother's body like a cliff over the sea. She can remember the way she screamed until her throat was raw, how her nails bent and bled as she refused to let go. The whole world existed in that point of contact.

Everything hinged upon her closeness. Without her she would be afloat– wild and loose, released into the terrifying emptiness of space. Without her mother, she was no longer a person but a motherless child, a pitiful creature dependent upon the charitable scraps of strangers.

She wishes someone had been there to save her at that moment. To lift her out of the flames of her pain and carry her to safety.

Enfys blinks away the tears that gather inside her helmet. It is her final inheritance from the woman she clung to. Her legacy, carved in bone. She holds Jyn close to her chest and stumbles out from the burning encampment, into the arms of her Cloud Riders, waiting with outstretched hands on the ramp of their ship.

The flag hanging off Saw's back sways in the recycled air as Enfys and the girl are ushered into the medic bay. She lets Jyn slip from her tired, aching arms.

Enfys has done a good thing. Once again, there will be more graves to dig tomorrow. Out there in the galaxy, somewhere, a long time ago, the syndicates and the Empire conspire to strangle all remaining scraps of love, family, and care that still persevere in this world. Right now, she watches the little girl crawl upon the bed to lay upon the much larger man and bury her face in the broad bulwark of his chest. His lungs rise and fall, labored, run by a machine. They will be for the rest of his life. He rests his hand on the small of his child's back and stares at the ceiling.

In another life, Enfys is seven years old and laying upon her mother's chest as her mother brushes her hair. There are no terrors in that room, no warships overhead or bombs waiting to burst. There is someone strong and steady there to save her. She isn't alone, forced to wear the mask of her mother far too young. She doesn't have to be fierce. She can just be a child.

In another world, Han Solo is barely a man, fighting a war he's too frightened of to win. He's a little boy, wishing there were someone to lift *him* out of his terror. Somewhere Lando is selling out a friend and saving another. He is holding his infant daughter against his chest, resting his hand on the small of her back, and staring at the ceiling in certainty that she will never be truly safe. In another life, Enfys lifts her helmet and a little girl's face hides behind it, squinting into the sunlight.

In another life, Qi'ra is a child, living rough on the streets. In another, she is learning how to suffer and endure under Maul's tutelage. Soon Enfys will hunt Qi'ra across the stars. Though allies once, she's sold her soul to the syndicates; Crimson Dawn will fall, and Enfys will have to do her best not to see the child in Qi'ra, too, who never had a choice either.

"I am so glad to see you, my child."

Enfys looks to the stars and wonders what her mother might say, to see her as she is now. She wonders if she'd set her hand upon her head, if she'd smile. Enfys wipes the tears from her eyes as she sets to remove her helmet. What would her friends and allies among the Cloud Riders say of her had they not been robbed of their speech?

Saw turns in the bed beside her and, clearing his throat before he dares take off the oxygen mask he's wearing, grasps Enfys' forearm. She flinches, looking at him with her bare face, eyes wide.

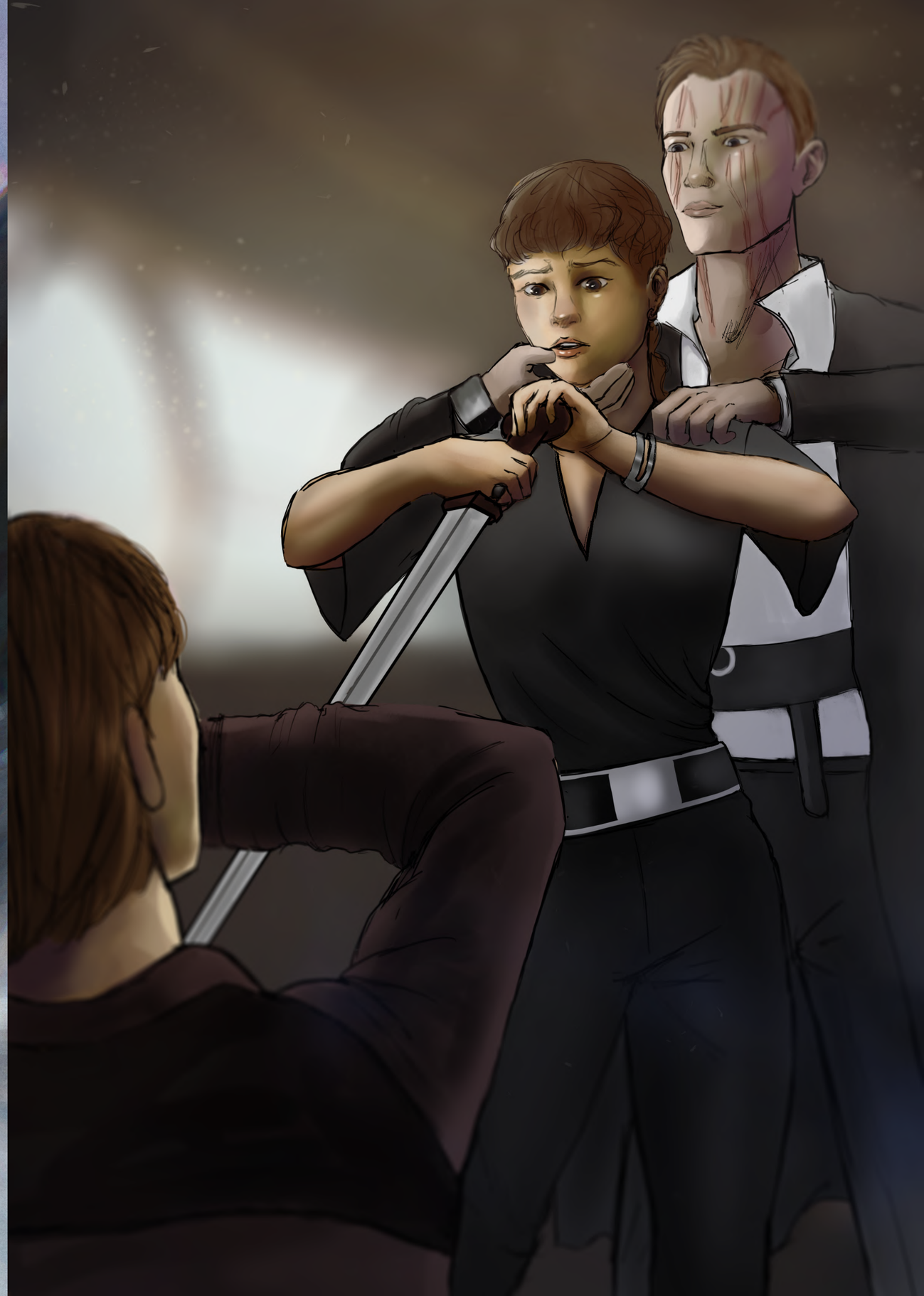
"Thank you," he says, voice strained and thick. Saw brushes Jyn's head as she lies against his chest. "Enfys. For all your good. For my girl."

She smiles. "The dream lives in our children."

Saw nods, smiling. She's never seen him do that before. "And in theirs."

"Until we can go no higher."

GALAXY IN BLUE ART



Don't Hold Your Breath, Kid

By Rosie

Enfys Nest had been wrong about Han Solo.

Or at least, that was how it seemed now, as she stared down at him with a disappointed look she hoped would seep through her mask. The Cloud Riders had cornered this ship on Formos, certain that it was being used to smuggle goods for the Hutt Cartel. Expecting to find some slime they'd likely encountered before, they were surprised when they instead found the same man who had been their ally not even a decade earlier, hiding beneath the floor grates.

Enfys, though, could not afford to be surprised. Instead, she was enraged. How could this be the same man she had invited to join their ranks?

A warrior would not cower in the cargo hold of his own ship. *A leader* would not be working for *Jabba the Hutt.*

Yet here he was before her, his fear proof that he was guilty of just that.

"It's been too long," Han said with an uneasy smile. It was clear to Enfys that–despite his attempts to hide it–Han was afraid of her. Good, she thought, he should be afraid. Anyone working under the Five Syndicates should fear her as if she were death itself.

"You have regressed back to old habits, Solo," she said plainly, allowing him and Chewbacca to climb out of the cargo hold, their hands over their heads. "Drop your weapons, the Wookiee first."

"Oh c'mon, you know his name," Han groaned, and

Chewbacca growled in exasperation. "I know, buddy, it *is* rude."

Chewbacca dropped his bowcaster and kicked it towards Enfys' feet, Han did the same with the blaster he kept holstered on his hip. She watched the weapons skid across the shiny black floors and land before her. Satisfied, she lowered her weapon and signaled for her riders to do the same.

"It is unfortunate that you have decided to pledge your allegiance to Jabba," Enfys said, her voice modulator warping her monotone into an unsettling sound.

"Look, I haven't pledged my allegiance to anyone," Han argued. "I take jobs where I find them. It's a tough galaxy, surely you can sympathize with that?"

The woman laughed–a strangled yelping sound through her voice modulator–and for a moment, hope flashed across Han's face.

"I do not take jobs from gangsters, neither do my friends." Enfys watched close as the gears in Han's head turned. She could see it in his eyes as they darted around, looking for another way out. "But I am willing to let you leave here unharmed."

Han let out a sigh of relief. Behind her, Enfys could feel her riders grow wary. They were rightfully uncomfortable about letting the man go.

"You made the right choice, Enfys," Han started, moving towards her with an eye on his blaster, which still laid at her boots. "I never forget my friends, you know–"

"Not so fast," she said, poking him back with the uncharged end of her staff. "I'd like to see just what you're smuggling for Jabba."

Han laughed, "It's really nothing that'd interest you, Enfys."

"You do not know what interests me," she countered, and he held his hands up in defeat.

"I suppose you're right," he shrugged. He bent down and reached into the cargo hold, but froze as Enfys' riders drew their weapons on him. "May I?"

Enfys nodded her approval, and her riders again lowered their weapons. Han pulled a large crate from beneath the grated floor. How he and Chewbacca fit under there with all this cargo was a mystery to her.

Han slid the lid off the crate to reveal what was inside: orange powder with an unmistakable glimmer. Just as quickly as he opened it, he shut it again.

“That’s at least fifty thousand credits worth of spice,” Weazel said from beside Enfys, his voice quiet in astonishment.

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“I’ve got a dozen of these crates under here,” Han said. “It’s not my typical work, but it’s where all the money is.”

Spice had somehow become even more lucrative in the past few years. Laws banning its production were strict, but only if you were unwilling to work with the Empire. Jabba the Hutt would never share profits or control with them, which is where men like Han Solo came in. An expert pilot was almost as hot a commodity as spice itself. Enfys had no doubt that Solo would earn a handsome sum for this job.

“How much are you being paid for your services?” Enfys asked.

“Not nearly enough,” Han laughed. “Fifteen thousand credits.”

“Smuggling spice is a death sentence in quite a few systems,” she nodded, processing his words. Fifteen thousand credits was far from adequate payment for a man risking his life.

Enfys thought carefully, the air heavy with anticipation of her response.

“What would you ask to part with this shipment, Solo?” she said finally, and behind her, she felt a few of her riders shift their feet. She was well aware that many, if not all of her riders would prefer to steal from the captain, but Enfys preferred to avoid such conflict, especially with a man who had once done her a great service.

“Nothing you could pay,” Han sighed, his voice barely loud enough for anyone to hear. Chewie growled at him, and he rubbed at his temples as if he was developing a headache. “But I figure you won’t be leaving here without the spice, will you?”

“I’m afraid not,” Enfys said. “But I am willing to give you compensation in exchange for your cooperation.”

Han looked as if he was about to argue but as soon as he opened his mouth to speak, he closed it once more. Instead, he simply smiled and shook his head fondly. “I appreciate that.”

Han accepted five thousand credits for the entire shipment. Enfys had never been naive, she knew that price was far from worth the risk Han took from losing Jabba’s shipment, and that the debt he would likely owe the gangster would be at least double what he received from her. But it would do Han no good to discuss his misfortune, so she simply hoped her gratitude could be felt through her cold mask.

As her riders loaded the last of the spice onto the *Aerie*, Enfys met Han at the bottom of the *Falcon’s* ramp. Formos had one of the darkest nights Enfys had ever seen, and though it provided good cover for their operation, it also hid the criminal activities of shadier beings she’d rather not encounter.

“You’ve done a great thing, Captain Solo,” Enfys sighed, taking his hand and giving it a firm shake that seemed to surprise him. “It seems I may be indebted to you.”

“Don’t sweat it,” Han shrugged. “If there’s anyone I trust to pay their debts, it’s you, Enfys. That’s part of the reason I don’t mind doing you this little favor.”

Enfys knew it was much more than a little favor, but she said nothing more. She nodded a final goodbye, and joined her Riders aboard the *Aerie*. It was odd, but even after a decade, she recognized the sore feeling of leaving Han. A man like him did not belong amongst gangsters and bounty hunters, though he undeniably had found a place there. To her, it felt wasteful, but she could not claim to understand a near-stranger who only made her acquaintance due to an unfortunate series of events. With this in mind, she pushed her disappointment away and allowed herself to celebrate the victory with the rest of the Cloud Riders.

It had been some time since Enfys was among the youngest of the rebels. On any base now you could find younglings barely old enough to talk, running about without a care, as if they weren’t surrounded by starfighters and men who had more kills to their name than they had years. If anyone dwelled on these children for too long, it would surely make them sick.

There were many girls the same age Enfys had been when she took on the mask, girls on the edge of adulthood, teetering between two worlds, the weight of

responsibility so heavy that they couldn't help but hurtle towards maturity much too quickly. She was sure that this phenomenon was among the Empire's worst crimes.

The princess of Alderaan had been at that volatile age when Enfys first met her, only a few years before her planet would be destroyed by the Empire. She had been formal, composed, and perfectly princess-like, even when tasked with handling important rebellion business. Despite this, Enfys could still see herself in the eyes of Leia Organa. It was unmistakable.

After Alderaan was lost, Leia had surged to the forefront of the Rebellion, both as a leader and a symbol. Enfys watched this from afar, and by the time they would meet again, nearly two years after the destruction of the Death Star, Leia had grown from a brave young woman to an undeniable leader. It was clear that any semblance of the child Enfys had met all those years ago had been lost, even before tragedy had struck. The Empire allowed no room for lingering naivety.

High command had instructed Enfys to meet Leia on the planet of Pasaana, where Leia would provide medical supplies to be taken to the front lines and Enfys would hand off an important datacard that could not risk being intercepted.

Enfys was alone. The rest of the Cloud-Riders hidden on the other side of the planet, recovering from a run-in with the Imperial fleet that had nearly cost Enfys her life. Their numbers had dwindled since the Rebel Alliance had formed, many unwilling to answer to the very same politicians who had ignored their plight against the Five Syndicates when the Galactic Republic had still been intact. Enfys did not agree with their reasoning, nor did she argue. If they could not dedicate themselves completely, they were better off leaving.

Enfys met the princess in a conveniently sheltered recess the mountains provided, a few klicks east of the nearest settlement, but far enough that the lights of the city looked like little stars in the distance.

She was only made to wait a few moments before she heard light footsteps approach her. The other woman emerged from the shadows, shedding the hood that had cast a shadow over her face. Enfys removed her helmet as well, comfortable in the presence of the princess and secure under the cover of night.

"Enfys Nest," Leia smiled, reaching out to shake her hand. "It's been too long."

"I was happy to hear it was you I'd be meeting with today," Enfys agreed.

"Likewise," the princess sighed.

As if on cue, a clattering noise came from behind Leia. Enfys reacted quickly, reaching for her staff, but the other woman simply shook her head softly, signaling for her to stand down.

"I hear you've spent quite some time in the Corellian system," she continued, paying no mind to the commotion. "Rebel command hasn't received communication from our Corellian based operatives in weeks."

Enfys began to tell the princess of the planet-wide raids that had prevented safe communication, but before she could a voice came from the shadows, interrupting their conversation.

"Come on, Princess, we don't have time for chit-chat!"

Enfys craned her neck to see who would be caught speaking that way to a princess, but just as he came into view, Leia gave her her answer.

"How many times must I warn you not to rush me, Captain Solo?" Leia groaned, the professional tone she'd held slipping away as she addressed the familiar man. "This is far from idle chatter."

"It's your credits, Princess," Han said with a shrug. "Just remember, I'm being paid by the hour."

"How could I forget?" Leia rolled her eyes. Han smiled at this, and it took him more than a moment to rip his gaze away from the woman and realize who else was in his company. Once he did, though, his face went white.

"Captain Solo," Enfys smiled, extending her hand towards Han. "I am certainly surprised to see you here."

Han hesitantly shook Enfys' hand, giving her a grin as a meager greeting. Quickly, his attention shot back towards Leia.

"You didn't tell me you were meeting with Enfys Nest," he said.

"I'm quite sure I did," she said, looking between the two of them curiously. "But I hadn't realized you two were already acquainted."

“Vaguely,” Han shrugged. “Enfys may be the only one in the galaxy who owes *me* something.”

“Oh, really?” Leia said doubtfully, though her eyes shone with a very real interest.

“It’s true,” Enfys confirmed, “Han helped me to steal from both Crimson Dawn and the Hutt Cartel. He is certainly a brave man.”

To everyone’s surprise, Han looked nearly shy at her compliments, but he played it off well. Leia, on the other hand, struggled to hide her admiration.

“I must admit I’m surprised to see you’ve finally joined the Rebellion, but it certainly fits you well.” For the first time, Enfys truly took in the man standing before her. Physically, he’d changed very little since the last time she’d seen him, but the difference was undeniable nonetheless. Han, who had always seemed flighty, now held an air of certainty around him.

“I’m no rebel,” Han said quickly, earning a glare from Leia. “But my job isn’t half bad.”

The princess’ expression softened at this, but so slightly that it was only Han’s bright look that brought real attention to it.

“I assure you, Captain, you are a rebel,” Enfys laughed. It was amusing that Han, despite having a few years on her, still held the stubborn nature of a teenager. “Whether you like it or not.”

Han seemed as if he wanted to argue, but no words came to him. Instead, he tried to look nonchalant, giving her a casual shrug.

“Let’s get this show on the road,” he said, clapping his hands together and turning back to the ship, where cargo was already being hauled off. Enfys nodded, bringing herself back to the moment. Despite the cover of night and the assurances that neither of their ships had been tracked, neither woman felt safe dragging out this job any more than necessary.

The three of them worked to off-load the crates from the *Falcon* and move them to Enfys’ speeder, which barely fit all the cargo. Leia, despite her size and royal status, could lift nearly as much as Han or Enfys. The older woman was a bit embarrassed to be so surprised by the princess’ strength, especially as Han looked unfazed, handing her heavy crates without much thought. Enfys supposed that may be from experience. She could imagine how Leia would react if Han were to doubt her abilities in any way.

It was Leia who was loading one of the last crates into Enfys’ speeder when the familiar screech of an Imperial TIE came from above. All three of them ducked low, Han and Enfys safe under the cover of the mountain, while Leia did her best to use the speeder as cover.

Han was quick to move toward her, but Enfys grabbed him, yanking him back forcefully. He looked at her as if she’d lost her mind.

“She’s completely exposed out there!” His voice was low, but he struggled against Enfys’ hold, and any commotion risked them more. She put a finger to her lips, telling him to hush.

“Running out there may expose her even more,” she said quietly. Han stopped trying to move away from her, and she relaxed her grasp. “They may not have seen us.”

For a few moments, the TIE screech continued to grow distant. Han took a couple deep breaths, and Leia stayed small and still in her hiding place. Enfys counted, estimating how far they’d gone until she couldn’t hear the haunting sound anymore. All three of them seemed to exhale at once.

“You see anything out there?” The familiar Imperial radio chatter could be heard close, but there wasn’t a soul in sight. Tension filled the air again, and Enfys prayed the trooper couldn’t feel it too.

“Speeder, I think,” the trooper replied. “It’s hard to see out here, let me check it out.”

As footsteps approached Leia, both Enfys and Han tightened their grips on their respective weapons. But they waited to move. Han wasn’t nearly as trigger happy as he looked.

But before they could draw their weapons, Leia drew hers. She must’ve been able to see the trooper better from her vantage point than Enfys could, because she acted quickly, hitting him square in the chest.

“What was that?” The officer on the other side of the radio was back again, and as Leia scurried back towards the mountain, he continued to ask for a reply.

“We have less than five minutes before they have an entire squadron here,” Leia said, her mind clearly buzzing. “Han, can we load the speeder onto the *Falcon*? We’ll get them off our trail and then deliver Enfys and the supplies.”

“I don’t know, princess,” Han said nervously. Leia looked at him hopelessly, and he couldn’t bring himself to say what Enfys knew. There was no way they’d be able to fit all that into the *Falcon*, and they certainly couldn’t offload the supplies now.

“I will take the speeder back to my ship as planned,” Enfys decided, though there weren’t any other options in her mind. “You two need to go, now.”

“Enfys, are you sure–” Leia began, but Enfys cut her off.

“I have nothing to fear from a squad of stormtroopers.” That was true, though it didn’t say much to what could come of her if they were smart enough to bring qualified reinforcements. She considered that to be unlikely, it had to be if she wanted hope of making it to the *Aerie* alive.

“Alright,” Leia agreed. She looked hesitant, but her legs did not hold the same reservations, and she quickly began to run back up the ramp. “Thank you, Enfys. May the force be with you.”

With that, she disappeared into the ship. Han was close behind her.

“I’m sure I’ll see you again,” he called as the ramp began to lift back into the ship.

“You will,” Enfys said.

Some months later, at whatever base the Rebels had fled to last, Han met Enfys again.

“I’m glad to see you alive,” he said, smiling brightly at the expressionless mask which seemed to alarm some of the pilots who passed by. “You really stuck your neck out for us there. I appreciate that.”

“It was the least I could do for the princess,” Enfys said. “She is a great leader. It would be devastating to lose her.”

“Yeah,” Han agreed with a sigh. “I don’t want to think what Rebel Command would’ve done to me if I lost her.”

Enfys nodded her goodbye and began to continue on her way, but before she could get very far, Han placed a hand on her arm, gently stopping her.

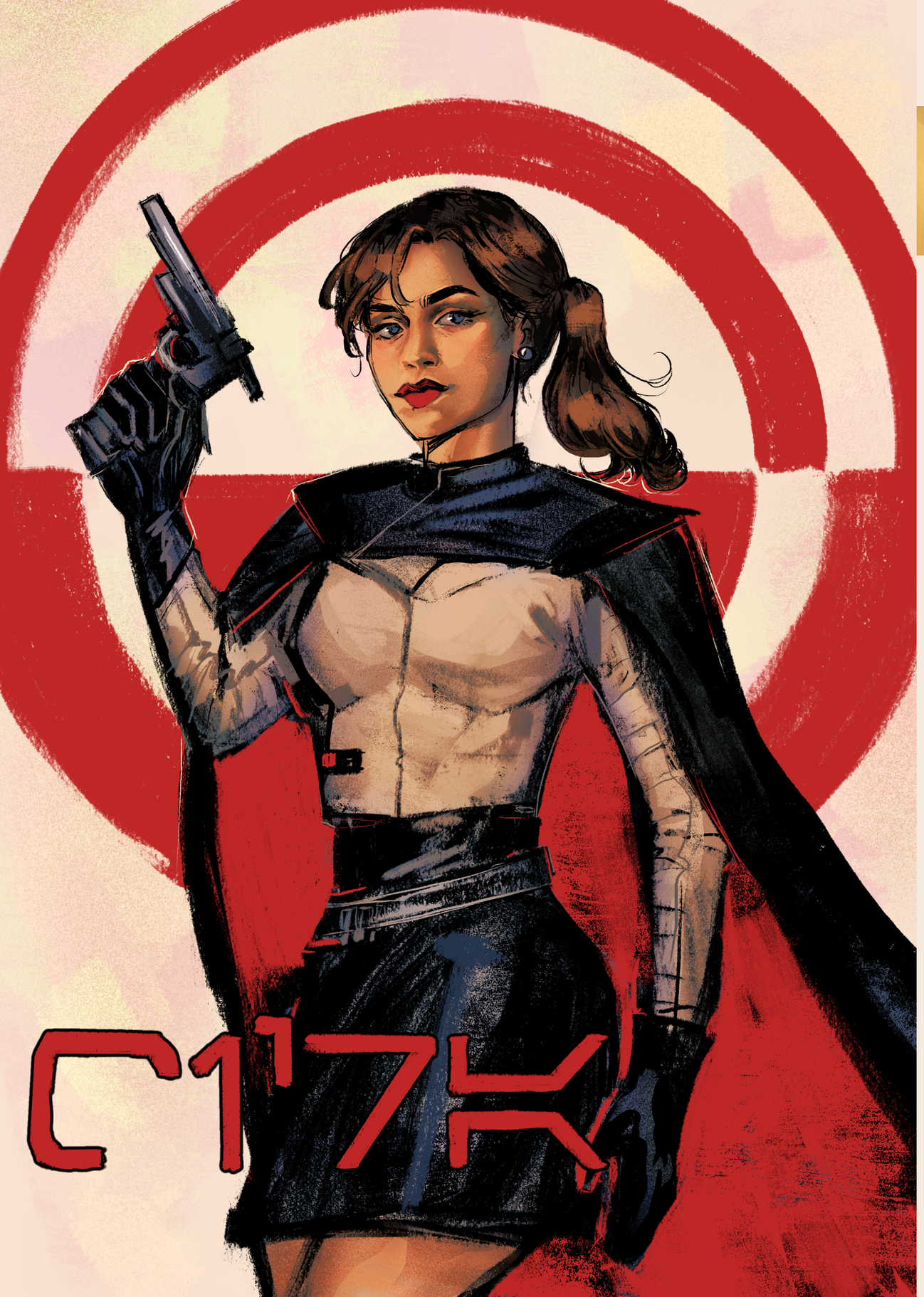
“I think we’re even now, Enfys,” he said, more serious than she’d ever seen him before. Some part of her wanted to protest, sure she had failed to communicate just how valuable he had been to her, but the look in his eyes told her that he wouldn’t agree. It seemed that for whatever reason, the princess meant quite a deal to him.

“As you wish, Captain Solo,” she said, and though he couldn’t see it, she smiled to herself.

Both of them had gone through a great deal of changes since Savareen, shifting through positions and allegiances. It seemed impossible either of them could truly know each other, and really, they didn’t. He had denied her offer to join the cause and instead went to work for criminals no better than Dryden Vos. Even now, he refused to truly commit to the Rebellion.

Han may have taken his time to get there, may still be taking his time, but Enfys was sure now that what she saw in him all those years ago was still there, stronger than ever.

That was good, she decided. The galaxy could use more people like Han Solo.



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